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ABSTRACT

This monograph provides an overview of traditional academic publishing in America today. Discussed first are the philosophical differences between trade and text publishing (which includes scholarly books), as they apply to the types of manuscripts selected for publication and expectations for profit. The paper goes on to explain how editors who work on scholarly books and professional networks function; and then follows the process of manuscript submission, acquisition, and selection, and, briefly, the actual book production process. A short section on publishing doctoral dissertations is followed by a discussion of the various review media for scholarly books. The problems of plagiarism are noted, and there is a careful discussion of the need to keep costs down. Finally, the paper reviews some of the many corporate changes and the increasing specialization, which also have impacted on scholarly publishing, and concludes with a note of appreciation for the value of scholarly publishing. (CH)

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"Scholarly Publishing in America"

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Someone once observed that the English Romantic movement, with its celebration of nature, the English landscape, and country life, did not emerge until the late eighteenth century, shortly after the time that industrialization and urbanization had begun to change forever the features of British life that the Romantic movement celebrated. In the same way, the unprecedented spate of publications in the last several years about the publishing of books and other media that use paper, such as journals, magazines, and newspapers, did not emerge until the dominance of those media was challenged by electronic publishing.

In the last ten years or so, far more has been published about publishing, itself, than in any similar period, and new journals, such as LOGOS, and organizations such as SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publication, in Madison, New Jersey, USA have been founded to study the field of publication. A torrent of specialized articles about book and journal publishing in traditional formats, including academic books and journals, has recently appeared, but much less has been published that seeks furnish an overview of academic publishing today. This article seeks to partially redress that imbalance and provide an overview of academic publishing, in traditional formats, in America today.

Scholarly Books

Within academia, books often serve as measuring sticks of scholars' reputations. The academic community expects scholars to extend their talents beyond the publishing of journal articles and into the hazy realm of that first book. In recent decades, the pressure on professors to publish has become more and more intense. The main reason why is because the academic labor market has become a buyer's market in most academic disciplines since about 1970. Therefore, colleges and universities can hire more able applicants than previously and demand more of them once they are employed. Many unheralded institutions that a generation ago routinely conferred tenure on faculty with few or no publications now demand substantial publication records. One result has been for professors to flood publishers of scholarly books with manuscripts, often manuscripts of mediocre quality. Since publishing, in general, can serve as the gauge of a

scholar's success or failure, the importance of scholarly publishing houses is obvious. These houses — or companies — serve as the gatekeepers between scholars and their potential readers and as the link between the scholar and a successful career.

Usually, "publishing" is divided into two major segments: trade and text. Trade includes popular fiction and nonfiction, while text includes textbooks, monographs, academic journals, and scholarly books. Sometimes "scholarly publishing" refers only to those publications with the intended audience of scholars. Scholarly book publishing houses, which include both independent companies and those associated with universities, differ from trade publishers mainly in the types of manuscripts they select, the marketing techniques they employ, and their overall philosophy. Scholarly houses, for the most part, emphasize academic quality and the publication of significant work above financial gain. For trade houses, a manuscript's quality and significance may be important, but its sales potential is always more important. Thus scholarly publishers, both the nonprofit university presses and the independent for profit ones, can offer authors little financial incentive to publish their manuscripts.

In recent years, scholarly publishers have paid more and more attention to manuscripts' potential commercial appeal, but unlike trade publishers, scholarly publishers generally aim for small yearly profits over a long period of sales. Trade books, however, are expected to do well within a short period of time -- usually months -- and pay off the publishing house's expenses. About half of all popular paperbacks are destroyed because of low sales. Roughly 40% of hardbacks are returned to the houses by bookstore chains. Scholarly publishers usually find an audience through direct mail, advertisements in trade magazines, and wholesalers. Trade houses often rely heavily on slick marketing to launch a new author or boost the sales of certain books. Particularly at large trade houses, marketing departments are actively involved in determining the potential of a manuscript.

"Scholarly book publishers" encompass a wide range of publishers, including the University of Chicago Press, which, as of 1995, maintained some 3,970 titles in print; Cambridge

University Press, with about 11,000 titles in print; and Lehigh University Press (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania), with 32 titles in print. Independent scholarly publishers, too, range in size.

Scholarly Editors and Professional Networks

Scholarly publishing houses can rarely afford expensive market research and thus cannot survey the market for a topic, find someone to write a book, and wait for the book to be written. The constant demand for new books is intense in all areas of the publishing industry. To a great extent, the houses depend on their reputations to attract significant works. More important, however, the publishers rely heavily on the expertise and networking ability of the editors (and, in some cases, marketing professionals) to gather the best manuscripts in particular disciplines. For editors, the key to scholarly publishing is keeping up with developments in various fields and knowing who the leading scholars are in those fields. Editors who have established good working relationships with scholars are more likely than others to have good sources of information, a list of potential reviewers of manuscripts, and current news about campus trends. "Networking" in scholarly publishing, as in many other fields, can be invaluable. Promising manuscripts within these networks may flow from one editor to another or even from one publisher to another. Editors' links extend to reviewers, current and potential authors, and editors at other publishing houses.

Editors of scholarly books may oversee the publication of some 25 or more books each year. But they operate within an organized academic community, which helps them with this process. Academic and professional authors meet regularly at conferences and annual meetings, so editors and authors have opportunities to meet and develop a consensus about what is new and valuable to the community. Editors (particularly at smaller publishing houses) also assume the attitude that keeping up relations with authors is good for the house. Publishers often rely on large travel budgets to keep editors in contact with authors, but editors also help maintain those relations through letters and personal contact. Editors need the screening and reviews of experts in particular

areas not only to determine the possibilities of a manuscript but also to reaffirm their own opinions. Editors travel to professional conferences and college towns to maintain relationships with reviewers and free-lance editors. In addition, they must keep aware of books published in competitive houses, as well as popular trends and interests of readers.

The Acquisition of Manuscripts

Because of their networks, editors may acquire manuscripts through meetings at scholarly conferences or by soliciting prospective authors who have already established a reputation through publication in scholarly journals. But editors may also acquire manuscripts in other ways: by receiving "over the transom" (unsolicited) pieces; direct referral from a person known to the editor; submission from an agent; and discovery of a topic or author by reading newspapers or magazines. Unsolicited manuscripts have only a slim chance of being published, although an editor occasionally chooses such a manuscript from within the slush piles. Scholarly publishers are more likely than trade publishers to discover new authors this way. A direct personal recommendation to an editor is a more efficient way toward publication, as is the use of a literary agent who knows the publishing houses.

For new authors, writing a query letter and sending sample chapters is a common method of inquiry. Few authors submit completed manuscripts; the majority submit only a prospectus and sample chapter or two, allowing the editor more of a role in the project than he or she would otherwise have and saving valuable time. Some editors respond more favorably to proposals than to complete manuscripts because they like to participate in developing the book. Proposals are short — rarely longer than six double-spaced pages -- and can be accompanied by an outline of the book plus a chapter or two.

Some scholarly authors, particularly if they are working on potentially commercial work, use agents to find publishers for their manuscripts. Authors can find the names of agents in such books as Writer's Market or Literary Market Place. Well-connected agents are helpful in finding

the right fit between a manuscript and a publisher. Agents help writers find the best publishers, and they try to get the best terms for their writers. Some agents represent authors of scholarly manuscripts, but usually the key "middle people" for these writers are readers and advisers. Academic readers act as agents of market research and quality control for scholarly publishers. However, some scholarly publishers, who pride themselves on personal and direct contact with their authors, are put off by agents or others acting as "middle people."

Choosing Manuscripts

The editors sift through numerous manuscripts and determine potential books based on four main concerns, as follows: 1. editorial, which includes the quality of the manuscript, competition in the area, editing problems, and the reputation of the author; 2. production costs, in particular how much the publishing house will have to spend to publish the book; 3. the contract, that is, how much in advances and royalties the house will need to pay; and 4. marketing, especially what type of audience the potential book will attract, how many copies of the book can be expected to sell, what the price of the book should be, and how many copies of it should be printed.

The overall attitude of the house is important -- whether the publisher considers itself politically liberal or conservative, for example. Some houses shy away from controversial manuscripts. Some university presses regularly accept simultaneous submissions; others do not routinely accept such submissions but will make exceptions. Ethics becomes a problem only if the author does not make it clear that the manuscript is being simultaneously submitted. Also, editors, like most others in any business, prefer cover letters addressed directly to them to letters addressed to their job titles.

Editors generally rely on experience and their instincts to determine the sales potential of manuscripts. Since they are often in the business partly because they love it, scholarly publishers will not necessarily turn down a manuscript because they believe it will not sell well. In fact, some

encourage submissions from authors whose manuscripts are too esoteric to find a publisher elsewhere. For instance, Limestone Press of the University of Alaska in Fairbanks' history department specializes in scholarly works on Russian America and pre-1867 Alaska; in 1995, it published two new titles and had 20 titles in print.

When considering manuscripts, editors also have to consider the competence and interests of the house; whether the author has published previously; the publishing house's current number of manuscripts on a particular topic; whether the manuscript covers much of the same information as does a book previously published or a manuscript about to be published; and how much of an editor's time a manuscript will demand. Some editors maintain that the best authors come from the best institutions, so a Harvard or Yale letterhead will often elicit at least attention, if not a publishing contract.

After a manuscript has been deemed potentially publishable, an editor usually solicits one or two outside reviews to determine whether it makes a substantial intellectual contribution to its field. Refereeing has been a common practice of journals for years, but the practice is now also the norm in scholarly book publishing. The reviewers may be asked to answer such questions as these: Does the manuscript contribute to knowledge in its field? Is its information accurate? Is the writing sound? Would the reviewer recommend the book to others? As much as anything, these reviews bolster the editor's own opinions about the manuscript. An experienced editor usually is close enough to his or her publishing specialty to have a good feel for the market.

If these reviews are favorable, the editor sends the author a proposal-to-publish form. The form seeks information about the author's professional background, a description of the manuscript and the author's reasons for writing it, as well as contractual information, a sales estimate, and a timetable. If the peer reviews are unfavorable, the editor may seek further opinions from within the publishing house or may abandon the project. Editors work independently enough that they can push for manuscripts they alone support, but they do have to consider the economics and politics of their decision making. Also, editors' powers, although often considerable, are not

absolute. As they guide a manuscript through the publishing system, editors may find themselves locked into various types of conflicts -- for example, with production managers over printing; with sales and promotion departments over marketing; and with designers over the book jacket.

The initial acceptance of a manuscript usually — but not always — leads to a publishing contract between the author and the publisher. Contracts for scholarly books, unlike those for trade books, are rarely offered over lunch. Sometimes the contract is not signed until a manuscript has been approved by both the peer reviewers and an editorial board. Some established authors may get contracts on the basis of just a prospectus or a couple of chapters, but a first time author generally is not offered a contract until he or she completes or nearly completes a manuscript. Once under contract, an author cannot attempt to publish portions of the manuscript elsewhere without specific permission from the book publisher.

Editing of scholarly manuscripts is usually minimal in comparison to that of other types of book manuscripts. The editor in charge of a particular manuscript may have to work with 25 or 30 titles a year and thus has little time to spend actually preparing the manuscript. Free-lance copy editors do the actual line-by-line editing, freeing the house editor to solicit new manuscripts, maintain networks with authors, reviewers, agents, and media representatives, and oversee the actual printing of the chosen manuscripts.

After the manuscript is edited, the author is responsible for proofreading and indexing. Next, the printer makes the plates and prints the books. The publisher checks final proofs and folds and gathers the pages. Then the printer prints the jackets. The binder manufactures a die, stamps the binding, and binds the book.

Publishing of Doctoral Dissertations

Universities used to require students to publish their doctoral dissertations in order to earn their degrees. However, that practice has been long abandoned, and those hoping to publish their dissertations had better be prepared to make major revisions. Still, publishers are flooded with

unrevised dissertations and theses. A revised dissertation will contain endnotes -- as opposed to footnotes -- and will avoid redundancy. Some people, rather than revise their work, decide to use the main theme of their dissertation as the basis of a brand new manuscript. Specifically, dissertation manuscripts that have the potential to become books provide context for their topic without constantly reviewing what has been discussed and what will be discussed in other chapters. The book, as opposed to the dissertation, should not be written defensively. The author must consider the new readers — not a dissertation committee with knowledge of the field, but a larger, less knowledgeable audience -- and usually reduce the number of footnotes.

The increase in the number of doctoral students means that publishers have many more dissertations than previously from which to choose. Therefore, they can be very selective. The number of doctoral degrees conferred in America has risen substantially during the past 30 years. Indeed, many academic publishers, in listing the kinds of manuscripts they wish to see, specify that they will not consider unrevised doctoral dissertations and would instead prefer to see a dissertation or its research data used as the basis for an entirely new manuscript.

Review Media for Scholarly Books

There are many different kinds of review media for scholarly books. One is journals, such as Booklist and Choice, that contain very brief reviews of books, including scholarly books, so that acquisitions librarians can decide whether or not to purchase them for their libraries.

For many academic disciplines there is a scholarly journal which consists mostly or entirely of book reviews (and occasionally book review essays, very brief reviews, and other types of book review). For history, this journal is the American Historical Review. Other such journals are the American Political Science Review, Contemporary Psychology, and Contemporary Sociology. In addition, other journals in many disciplines -- while containing substantial amounts of material other than book reviews -- nonetheless publish many reviews. In sociology, for example, these include the American Journal of Sociology and Social Forces.

Some journals review books not just in a particular discipline but in a broad field, such as the humanities or the social sciences. For the social sciences, these would include the National Interest, Public Interest, and Society.

Journals concentrating on art and culture, often intended not only for scholars but also for the general, well-educated reader, frequently review scholarly books. Some such journals are the American Scholar, Hudson Review, Mississippi Quarterly, Partisan Review, Raritan, Sewance Review, and the Yale Review.

Magazines and journals of political opinion, too, often review some scholarly books. These include, on the "right," the American Spectator, Intercollegiate Review, and National Review, and, on the "left," Dissent, the Nation, and the New Leader.

Just as some scholarly journals consist mostly or entirely of book reviews, so do some publications for the general well-educated reader feature mostly book reviews. Pre-eminent among these is the New York Review of Books; another is the Women's Review of Books.

Finally, some newspapers publish book review sections. The Village Voice Literary Supplement appears ten times a year. Among major daily newspapers, the New York Times, San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle, and Washington Post all publish Sunday book review sections that cover some scholarly books.

Plagiarism

Publishers, while concerned with numerous legal issues, including copyright, involving manuscripts, must also be alert to plagiarism. In the past, those in academia spoke little of plagiarism; it was just not something that the vast majority of scholarly researchers would consider doing. But the pressure to publish, among other factors, has pushed some academic authors to steal words and ideas from others. Even some well-respected scholars have been found to have liberally "borrowed" from others' work. Many of the allegations arise in the well funded and highly competitive science disciplines.

The determination that editors and publishers have to make is whether a work is based on the ideas of another work, an extension of the ideas of another work, or actually the same work with a few reorganized paragraphs. This may mean deciding the "intent" of the writer -- whether the author intended to mislead the publisher or whether he or she simply relied too heavily on the work of another. The editor, even with a vast network, cannot be expected to have intimate knowledge of every major work in a field and thus must rely to a great extent on the reviewers and, sometimes, simply on the ethics of the author.

In any case, misconduct during the publishing process has legal implications when it involves the intentional violation of copyright, particularly through misrepresentation, forgery, or fraud.

Keeping the Costs Down

Scholarly publishers usually operate on a low investment, low return plan in which sales are conservatively underestimated so that profits are possible. Authors are often treated more as friends or partners than as money machines or adversaries, and they are frequently eager just to see the manuscript with a cover on it. Thus they often have low expectations for promotion and tend to be happy about any marketing efforts made by the house. The marketability of a scholarly book is, of course, judged differently from that of a trade book. Still, the sales of the book depend to a great extent on the marketing strategies -- including the jacket, the pre-publication publicity, and advertising -- as determined by the other gatekeepers (in the design and marketing departments) within a publishing house. Marketing plays an increasingly important role in scholarly publishing. The marketing department (in some cases, marketing person) is expected to understand the kind of information that scholars in a certain field need and to seek manuscripts that will meet their needs.

Some small, for profit scholarly houses attempt to reach a broad spectrum of academics from several disciplines. Often, their books deal with public issues or make serious contributions to scholarship. Ideally, these books end up being the ones that professors buy for themselves. In

general, profits are made because advances are small -- usually under $10,000 -- advertising is kept to a minimum, and print runs are short.

The cost of publishing a scholarly book, in terms of advance, production, and advertising, is often relatively small. Publishers may need to sell only 1,000 or so copies to make a profit. Some copies are then kept on the backlist until orders are received because, unlike "best sellers," which must sell well immediately to help publishers make profits, scholarly books may be "discovered" months or even years after the initial printing. The number of books on many backlists has shrunk, however, in recent years.

Unlike editors of trade books, editors of scholarly books are seeking approval within academic networks. Their goal is not necessarily to get an author on a morning television talk show (this happens only to the authors of the very few scholarly books that reach trade fame) but to garner respectable sales -- perhaps only 6,000 or 7,000 copies -- among the intended audience. Once in a while, however, a scholarly book sells very well. In 1950, for example, Yale University Press published just 1,500 copies of David Riesman's (with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denny), The Lonely Crowd. However, it became a great commercial as well as critical success. Shortly after a paperback edition was published in 1954, its sales surpassed 500,000, and the book continues to sell well even today.

Scholarly publishers often rely on direct mailings and mail order responses to determine print runs and audience size for future books. The more specialized a book's topic, the more likely that the publisher will rely on direct mail as a sales method. Costs for such mailings run about 20% of the publication expenses and form the foundation for a successful book. Another factor in whether these books will gain an audience involves the use of "opinion leaders" -- persons attuned to the media who keep up with trends and inform others about them. Reaching such people can boost a book's reputation and thus its sales.

Professional journal ads may be used, but most of the promotional effort goes into direct mail efforts. Usually, scholarly houses advertise at least two or three related books in a single

mailing to cut the costs of marketing. That is why they often deliberately seek more than one manuscript at a time in a specific area. Marketing depends on reaching those who study or work in the same or a related field. Publishers sometimes use displays at scholarly and professional conferences to promote a scholarly book. The procedure, overall, requires considerably less time and money than promotion for a trade publication.

The industry minimizes overhead costs by contracting with authors on a royalty basis and by sometimes tying editors' salaries to the sales of books. Larger houses often use free-lancers for copy editing, design, and artwork, while smaller houses rely even more heavily on free-lancers, sometimes hiring them as the editors who guide the manuscripts through the publishing process. Large publicity campaigns are generally reserved for those books considered likely to achieve commercial success -- the occasional crossover.

Changes In Publishing

In 1959, Random House crossed the border between craft occupation and corporate enterprise when 30% of its stock was sold to the public. A later merger with Alfred Knopf and the acquisition of Pantheon Books accelerated the company's growth. The trend from independent publishing houses to conglomerates has affected numerous publishers, even in the scholarly houses. The American publishing industry grew enormously during the 1960s and 1970s, attracting outside financing from such large companies as Xerox and Time. Book publishing revenues soared from just under $500 million in 1950 to more than $7 billion some 30 years later. The surge in revenues, which might be attributed to a number of socioeconomic factors, including the growth of higher education and rising rates in literacy, bolstered publishing houses of all sizes. Publishers also raised capital through public stock issues or by mergers. Now, many formerly independent publishing houses are owned by multimedia groups such as MCA, Times Mirror, and Time Warner. Critics blast the industry for monopolizing ideas and warn about the possibilities, especially at trade houses, of incestuous relationships among publishers and film makers.

The fact that publishing has become a large corporate enterprise has also had financial effects. Editors at larger publishing houses labor under the severe pressures of putting out a quota of books and having to make money. The industry is dominated by these media giants, as well as by semiautonomous firms with corporate backers. Still, publishers do not necessarily believe that their owners interfere with the actual work of the houses. Owners' main concern is the "bottom line." Editorial decisions are more often influenced by the policies of the house, and in larger firms, by the relationships among the departments, than by the corporate ownership. The type of book published is often the key variable in the organization of the house. Houses that publish textbooks, for example, tend to be more bureaucratically organized than are scholarly houses.

Like many other areas of the multimedia industry, book publishing has grown into such an enormous commercial business that the role of its key people -- in this case, the editors -- has changed dramatically in the past 25 years. Editors, particularly in large houses, spend considerably less time working with authors on manuscripts and considerably more time than they did formerly planning the future of particular books and competing with other houses to attract authors. Editors are no longer generalists but more likely to be "acquisitions editors" who spend most of their time seeking suitable manuscripts and negotiating contracts.

Specialization of Publishing

The educational revolution that resulted in an enormous increase in college students also resulted in the specialization of academic publishing. The dramatic corresponding increase in faculty to teach these students meant that more research than ever was being done all over the United States and that reprints were suddenly in demand. University presses increased production, and smaller, independent publishers found their niches. Smaller houses often specialize in a particular type of book -- scholarly works in one or a few fields, reference books, or textbooks, for example. Larger publishers are usually divided into separate departments that handle particular types of books. Those small firms that concentrate on "how-to" books or books of regional interest

are probably as likely to return a profit as the larger firms that attempt to appeal to a wide, general audience or maintain a high profit margin through the publication of textbooks. In addition, some small firms survive by reissuing titles that large companies have allowed to go out of print. Smaller houses usually maintain close contact with authors, resulting in faster decision making than at larger houses. These houses can often predict fairly accurately the sales of their specialized books.

The Scholarly Realm

The gatekeepers of scholarly publishing occupy a vital position in the industry. Most people, when they think of book publishing, are more likely to think of Warner Books or Bantam Books than of such scholarly houses as the University Press of New England or Carolina Academic Press. Yet those houses that publish scholarly books greatly influence the current and future leaders of society.

Like publishers of trade books, scholarly houses have to consider the financial aspects of the business -- whether a book will sell enough copies to cover the cost of publishing it, for example. However, when an editor at a publisher of scholarly books looks over a new manuscript, he or she is not just looking for a title that might look good on the shelves of a bookstore. The editor knows that the books his or her company publishes could have a more lasting impact than those that sell millions and win movie contracts. When an editor determines that a manuscript should be published, he or she is clearing a trail for other scholars -- and thus, in a sense, for our culture -- to follow.